

# Food vendors welcome, so long as they play by rules

## ■ Houston official counts the violations found in her area

By COUNCIL MEMBER TONI LAWRENCE

**A**CROSS our city, there are approximately 1,200 vans, trailers and carts serving various food items on street corners and parking lots. The Houston Department of Health and Human Services licenses and regulates mobile food vendors to protect the health and safety of their customers. State law requires mobile food vendors to follow basic food preparation practices, meet sanitary standards and return to a licensed commissary for cleaning every 24 hours of operation.

Over the last few months, my office has received numerous calls regarding the unsanitary operation of several mobile food vendors throughout District A. We referred these con-

cerns and complaints to the city's Consumer Health Services Bureau and to the Houston Police Department's Differential Response Team (DRT), which has been trained to deal with various city ordinances, regulations and codes.

On May 3, DRT Sgts. Hank Hernandez and David De Los Santos accompanied city health inspectors on a district-wide inspection of mobile food vendor operations. Because of the sporadic movement of the vendors, the DRT officers assisted the inspectors with the difficult task of locating many of the units. Unfortunately, 13 of the 27 units, almost half of the units inspected, were immediately shut down because of severe violations of the health code. An additional 25 citations were issued, and several others received only a verbal warning.

Several businesses were cited for failing to return to the commissary, one was charged with fraudulently displaying a commissary receipt and another had cockroaches. The Chronicle's May 14

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editorial ("Upward mobility / Taco vendors are hard workers and assets to Houston — as long as they observe the law.") conceded that some of the vehicles no longer had wheels, making it impossible to return to a commissary for required daily sanitizing as required by law.

Other issues discovered during the inspection included improperly connected propane tanks, which violate the fire code and present a hazard to

the community, and electrical connections that did not meet city code.

Most alarming, constituents also have reported that mobile vendors were disposing of grease into the storm sewer system. This is a serious issue that adds to Houston's drainage problem. Along with associated health concerns, the abuse of our storm drainage system cannot be tolerated because of our city's flooding concerns. The city is constantly addressing obstacles to our flooding and drainage needs, and we simply cannot allow grease to clog our storm water runoff.

Many businesses in Houston begin with one or two people and a dream. This is exactly the entrepreneurial spirit that has made Houston the can-do city of opportunity it has become. If you play by the rules and work hard, this community embraces your efforts.

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*Lawrence represents District A on Houston City Council.*